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RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL PRIORITY 1294  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 1377  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DUSHANBE 000304

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SUBJECT: BBC IN DUSHANBE: "DON'T DIS A SMALL COUNTRY AND YOU CAN GET  
YOUR FREQUENCY BACK"

REF: DUSHANBE 0072

CLASSIFIED BY: Richard E. Hoagland, Ambassador, EXEC, Embassy  
Dushanbe.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

1. (C) In a surprisingly tough meeting February 14, the Ambassador joined his European and OSCE colleagues for what was supposed to have been a joint Western demarche about the BBC Tajik Service having lost its permission January 10 to broadcast on FM-106 in Dushanbe (reftel). French Ambassador Pierre Andrieu, UK DCM Margaret Beloff, and OSCE Deputy Head of Mission Andrey Shugurov also participated. Foreign Minister Talbak Nazarov headed the Tajik phalanx along with Communications Minister Said Zubaidov, Chairman of Radio and Television Broadcasting Asadullo Rahmonov, and Head of the Foreign Ministry's Legal Department Sherali Jononov who took notes but said nothing.

2. (C) UK Ambassador Graeme Loten had requested the joint meeting about ten days earlier, but the MFA sprang the meeting on the Western side with three hours notice, possibly because EU regional Ambassador Adriaan van der Meer had raised the issue with President Rahmonov February 12. Loten was out of town on other business, and Beloff was not well-prepared for the meeting. Ambassador Andrieu took the lead, playing the role of honest broker exceptionally well. Even the often-strange Shugurov tried to be helpful.

3. (C) Because Foreign Minister Nazarov had previously told the

U.S. and French Ambassadors and German Charge individually that he had the highest respect for BBC, which had "never once done anything to harm Tajikistan," we were taken aback by his uncharacteristically sarcastic opening salvo: "So here we sit today without the main guilty person (UK Ambassador Loten) in the dock."

#### THE TAJIK VERSION

¶4. (C) Without going into the mostly untranslated and painful minutiae of the 75 minutes of rapid-fire accusations, counter-accusations, and circular logic, the Tajik position follows. As early as April 2005, the Committee for Radio and Television Broadcasting (CRTB) had notified the Ministry of Communications, with whom BBC had its previous agreements, that BBC would need to re-register when the new legislation on broadcasting pending in the parliament would become law. MinComm and CRTB conducted a voluminous exchange of letters and memos between themselves, flashed at us from bulging folders, and the MinComm eventually informed BBC, at least orally. The MinComm had the lead because BBC had signed its 1999 and 2003 broadcast agreements with that ministry in accordance with the relevant law at that time.

¶5. (C) A BBC delegation from London came to Dushanbe in June 2005, but left without a clear idea of what would be required to re-register, because the new law had not yet been passed and the implementing regulations not promulgated. BBC continued, then, to rely on its local Tajik representative, whom FM Nazarov repeatedly and disdainfully dismissed as an "unreliable low-life."

¶6. (C) In fact, the pending broadcast licensing bill was not signed into law until September 1, 2005, and the implementing

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regulations were not published until mid-November. The new registration form listing the required supporting documents was not available until mid- to late December. "It's all on the Internet," FM Nazarov commented caustically. "Don't you people use the Internet?"

¶7. (C) Apparently BBC London, unused to Tajikistan's sometimes ridiculously short deadlines for legal affairs, decided to move with "all deliberate speed," meaning they did nothing, and thus were booted from the FM-106 frequency January 10.

¶8. (C) FM Nazarov excoriated the local BBC "lowlife" representative for calling a press conference on January 11 to protest Tajikistan's "political oppression," and laid into Shugurov for OSCE's "typical knee-jerk reaction to make us look like thugs." The academic-at-heart Nazarov ridiculed the Tajik BBC representative as akin to "a bad student from a rich family who ignores all honest advice with impunity."

¶9. (C) Nazarov archly concluded, "Fill out the form, Dear Lady Diplomat, attach your supporting documents, and you'll be back on the air the next day. But I don't care if you take a day, a week, or ten years - you must meet our law. We will not tolerate an arrogant foreign conglomerate [sic] abusing a small country."

#### A MODEST PROPOSAL - REJECTED

¶10. (C) The U.S. Ambassador suggested that since the matter appeared to be purely legal-technical and not political, the Government of Tajikistan might want to consider an exception for an interim license to get BBC back on the air locally until it can submit its documents. This would mitigate the currently negative perceptions in Western capitals. French Ambassador Andrieu and OSCE Deputy Head of Mission Shugurov enthusiastically supported this suggestion. Nazarov thundered, "No! Never! We are a nation of law, and you must follow our law, just as we follow the law in your countries."

¶11. (SBU) DCM Beloff undertook to report the requirements to

BBC London and get the paperwork done as quickly as possible.

ANOTHER VIEW

¶12. (C) Embassy Dushanbe's PAS FSN Media Assistant attended the meeting. Afterward, he opined the issue is indeed political, not technical-legal. The local Tajik BBC staff are known to identify strongly with the Tajik political opposition. Even if BBC submits all the required documents to the CRTB with all the required notarial stamps, BBC will still face the formidable task of then registering with the Ministry of Justice. He suggested President Rahmonov's circle simply will not tolerate an independent source of news and information readily available to Dushanbe during the presidential election year. This is not unprecedented. The U.S.-funded NGO, Internews, has also had problems getting its community radio stations registered and licensed. There are also rumors that if BBC adds a Kulobi staffer or two to its Dushanbe office, friends of the President, all will proceed smoothly.

¶13. (C) COMMENT: Although Embassy Dushanbe not infrequently has "frank discussions" with Tajik Government officials, we have never before seen FM Nazarov in such high dudgeon. Because of the surprisingly raw emotions in this meeting, we tend to suspect neither side disclosed the full story. It's also

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possible that Nazarov felt he'd unfairly been called on the carpet by President Rahmonov over this issue. We want to judge that the BBC issue is mostly legal-technical, but we cannot wholly discount our FSN's political analysis. While Minister of Communications Zubaidov is an apolitical technocrat and looked decidedly uncomfortable in the meeting, CRTB Chairman Rahmonov is a recent Kulobi-clan political appointee and appeared self-satisfied. Once BBC submits the required documents for re-licensing, we will see which way the political wind blows. Whatever eventually happens - and we will work quietly to help this end well - BBC is not at all in good political favor these days in a few halls of the Tajik Government. END COMMENT.  
HOAGLAND